

## **A fragile coalition and random events.**

How to achieve mainstream status?

### **Children – the collateral damage?**

The buzz of the World Forum 2005 in Montreal still ringing in my ears I am trying to summarise and illustrate some aspects of the many presentations and discussions I attended.

We heard appalling stories of children subjected to brutality and violence, of communities battling against discrimination and neglect, of countries sacrificing their children in civil war and of large parts of the African continent being savaged by HIV/Aids. We heard the little voices, the voices of ordinary families and young children in extraordinary circumstances. And most astonishingly: These little voices combined to a loud roar of hope - not despair.

And this is our strength. The strength of families, the strength of young children is their never-ending hope and confidence that the future will be a better place, that in fact the future is theirs. This strength extends to those of us who work with or advocate for young children. It is palpable wherever we meet and it was particularly palpable during those days in spring in Montreal.

But there is weakness, too. It appeared to me that there is an almost global sense of insecurity and vulnerability among the people who work with or for very young children: Why do we have to make the case for high quality early childhood development and education again and again when this case has been made so well and so many times before? Why do we seem to depend on seemingly random political and economic events to further the status of early childhood? Countries with long established and secure early childhood education systems, such as the Scandinavian countries or France where not represented at the World Forum. Perhaps these countries have achieved a status for the young child, which makes it less urgent for them to come to the World Forum?

I had the privilege to participate at a luncheon for participating Government representatives and the common concerns across very different countries was striking. What were those common concerns? Top of the list was the historical split between “care” and “education” and the resulting fragmentation of government responsibilities. In some countries, up to seven ministries are involved in policy and delivery of early years services! The uncertainty of funding for services, issues around the qualification of staff and access to services were also frequent concerns.

### **National early childhood delivery systems**

Rosemary Murphy presented an overview of recent developments in the United Kingdom and described how demographic and economic change has been the main drive for the increase in early years provisions there. Highlighting the dependency of early childhood services on rather unrelated events she also listed a new reforming government and the fact that some of the senior politicians had young children themselves.

Bander Alswelem from Saudi Arabia reported from a very different social and economic perspective. He asked an interesting question of the western participants: Would early childhood services be developed at the current pace if female labour market participation were only 5% or less? Is economic necessity and the need of business the real driver of development rather than the rights and needs of children? In Saudi Arabia, with very few working mothers, they *have* to prioritise the case for quality and child development.

Liu Yan from the People’s Republic of China put things into perspective for some of us from the smaller nations: There are about one hundred million children under six years of age! The range and quality of provision for these children are impressive.

Christiane Bourdages Simpson from the Quebec provincial government presented an overview of recent initiatives by the province of Quebec. Again, the vulnerable status of early childhood education became apparent as the future of early years investment was decided by only one vote in the Canadian Parliament!

A very different picture emerged from the presentation by Beatriz Londono. She told us of many poor, malnourished and unwanted children in Columbia but also that 3% of all income tax is expended on early childhood care and education.

### **Advocacy for early childhood development**

Graciela Borja and Ivan Galindo from Mexico provided a good example how modern information technology may be used in promoting early childhood development and in networking of practitioners across a large country.

Éva Deák and Éva Lilla Lampert from Hungary gave us an interesting insight how good models of early childhood education can influence formal primary education through dialog between kindergarten teachers and primary school teachers.

A group of colleagues from South Africa conducted a successful campaign of advocacy among severely disadvantaged communities using a combination of simple posters, leaflets and workshops.

### **Global trends in early childhood education**

Glen Palmer questioned the suitability of “western” models of early childhood provisions for indigenous cultures in Papua New Guinea and East Timor. She painted a very colourful image of these cultures and their unique needs.

Cornelia Cincilei reminded us of the particular challenges faced by the countries of the former Soviet Union. In Moldova, for example, much valuable infrastructure of early childhood services has been destroyed in the transition to a market economy and great effort is made to rebuild services with very few resources.